

Reuters, September 21, 2007

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - As Chinese President Hu Jintao moves to cement his power at a key Communist Party congress next month, he'll face that challenge with far more quiet on the American front than his recent predecessors.

Just this month, U.S. President George W. Bush emerged from a meeting with Hu in Australia declaring the two men had a "personal relationship".

"We can share issues together. I can say, 'what are your biggest problems?', and he can say to me, 'what are your problems?'" waxed the U.S. president, who had a far more stressful summit the same week with U.S. ally South Korea.

Hu's China and Bush's United States have far more things to talk about than in simpler times, when Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong teamed up against the Soviet Union. China-U.S. conflict and cooperation play out globally, from Sudan's troubled Darfur region to the nuclear schemes of North Korea and Iran.

But they also have far more channels open now than they did when Bush took office. In 2001, China, under Hu's predecessor, didn't even answer U.S. phone calls for many hours after a Chinese fighter crashed into an American EP3 spy plane.

"The overall relationship has come a long way, starting from the EP3 to now, where we have the senior dialogue, the Strategic Economic Dialogue and the relationship between the presidents," said Victor Cha, a scholar who served two years as Bush's National Security Council Asian affairs director.

Those sets of high-level meetings on the diplomatic, trade and financial issues were launched from a hard-won U.S. "understanding that you have to work at the very top with China to get things done", said Cha.

At another level, Democratic Rep Rick Larsen from Washington and his Republican co-chairman of the Congressional U.S.-China Working Group, Rep Mark Kirk of Illinois, have opened a pipeline to Chinese officials who not long ago tended to shun Congress as a bastion of China bashers.

"We've pushed really hard over the last couple of years for the Chinese embassy to get Congress on the dance card when they have people come through Washington," Larsen told Reuters.

"TOUGH ISSUES" LURK

The group has drafted legislation to boost Chinese language study in the United States and build more U.S. consulates in China. They've brought China's ambassador to Capitol Hill to discuss the crisis in Sudan's Darfur and hosted China's product safety tsar after a series of health scandals over Chinese-made toys, toothpaste, food and drugs.

Officials Larsen and Kirk met in China last month were "consistent in their belief that the relationship is very strong -- strong enough to withstand these issues that we're dealing with, like food safety and currency", Larsen said.

To be sure, no one in Washington is predicting smooth sailing forever in a relationship beset by a \$200 billion -- and rising -- Chinese trade surplus with America that many blame on an overvalued Chinese currency, wide gaps over human rights and lingering military suspicions.

Conservative commentator John Tkacik, a Chinese-speaking former U.S. diplomat, has complaints about Hu and about Bush's handling of China.

"Hu has enthusiastically accommodated the People's Liberation Army's pressures to turn China into a military power" and "he has been cracking down on dissent in print, on the Internet, in blogs and in demonstrations", said the Heritage Foundation analyst.

Tkacik voiced the dismay of some American conservatives that Bush has moved too close to China over self-ruled Taiwan, which China claims as its own, and warns that preoccupation with Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran has left Washington unable to deal with China firmly.

"There's nothing positive on China's geopolitical help except that China has very carefully avoided head-on clashes with the U.S. over Iran, North Korea and Sudan," he added.

But Cha says he witnessed Beijing's cooperation with Washington over North Korea evolve at six-party nuclear disarmament talks. China's comfort with the U.S. relationship "allows them to be less prickly" about Taiwan and Japan, he added.

"Tough issues" remain in bilateral ties, such as the U.S. push for more transparency on China's military budget and its anti-satellite warfare aims after an alarming test this year, said Cha.

"But in the past, that stuff was the entire relationship. Now it's just one part of the overall relationship," he said.